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ABSTRACT

Shedding light on the current debate on the nature of the relationship between vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension, a study investigated student perceptions of the present state of vocabulary instruction. Subjects, 20 students from each of three grade levels (first, fifth, and eighth), from two schools in suburban Maryland, were selected by their teachers as at least average readers based on standardized test scores. Each of the 60 students was interviewed individually using a structured eight-item interview form. Results showed that while few first graders had even a rudimentary system for learning new words, the majority of eighth graders could articulate a personal system. In addition, students were able to pinpoint methods employed by their teachers to teach them new words, and the systems which students used often parallelled classroom instruction. Also, whereas both first and fifth graders relied heavily on external authority to tell them if they knew a word, most eighth graders relied on their own ability to use and understand others using the word. In one portion of the interview, students were given an unfamiliar word and were asked what they wanted the examiner to do to help them learn it. First graders asked mainly for the examiner to say the word, while fifth graders displayed more interest in learning the meaning of the word, and eighth graders consistently asked for the definition. (Four figures are included and nine references are attached.) (ARH)

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Vocabulary Learning at Various Grade Levels: Student Perspectives

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Schema theory has become the byword in reading instruction in the 1980's. One of its main tenants focuses on the importance of an individual's prior knowledge in the comprehension process. This in turn has led to renewed interest in vocabulary instruction. Educators are again taking a close look at the relationship between vocabulary and comprehension. The results are sometimes confusing. To be sure, both common sense and research have told us that a relationship exists area between vocabulary and comprehension (Anderson and Freebody, 1981; Davis, 1944; Johnson, Toms - Bronowski, and Buss, 1983). Yet the nature of that relationship remains somewhat elusive. While some studies support the notion that teaching vocabulary improves comprehension (McKeown et.al. 1983), others don't (Jenkins, Pany, and Schreck, 1978). Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) in their meta-analysis of vocabulary studies found that the particular vocabulary methods employed had an effect on comprehension.

Teachers believe that teaching vocabulary is important (Blachowicz, 1984), yet devote almost no time to such instruction (Durkin, 1979). Small wonder that minimum instruction occurs since teachers frequently follow directions in teachers manuals, and the manuals provide almost no instructional suggestions (Beck et.al. 1979). It is not surprising that as Blachowicz (1986) reports, teachers are aware that they should do more with vocabulary, but are not at all sure what that should be.

If teachers are confused, where does that leave students? This investigation was undertaken, in part, to add the aspect of student perceptions to the present picture of vocabulary instruction.

METHOD*

The subjects for this study were selected from two schools in a suburban Maryland School system. Twenty students from each of three grade levels (first, fifth, and eighth) were selected by their teachers as at least average readers based on standardized test scores. Each of these sixty students was interviewed

individually by one of two interviewers using a structured eight-item interview form . All interviews were taped for later analysis.

RESULTS

Answers to the question"What do you do to learn new words?" indicate that students develop systematic strategies over time. For the purpose of this study, a systematic strategy was considered to be at least a two-step sequence related by the student to the interviewer. Whereas few first graders had what could be termed even a rudimentary system, by the time students were in eighth grade, the majority could articulate a personal system. Fifth graders fell somewhere between those extremes, with those who could describe a system usually listing a 2-step sequence. A typical fifth grade system was "sound out the parts; look it up in the dictionary." A well-developed eighth grade system was "check in the glossary; write the word down; go over it 3 times; go on to another subject; then come back to the word and see if I remember it." Figure 1, below, summarizes the results of the question "what do you do to learn new words?" (As one examines each of the figures that appear throughout this summary it should be noted that not columns add up to twenty; some students gave multiple responses to an item, while others declined to answer.)

Figure 1
SYSTEM FOR LEARNING VOCABULARY

	Grade 1	Grade 5	Grade 8
System	2	11	11
No System	16	9	9

Figure 2 lists the most common responses for all three grades for the item which asked "what does your teacher do to teach you new words?" Students could indeed state what their teachers did to teach them new words. In fact, it became evident that the systems which students used often parallelled classroom instruction, as reported by students.

Figure 2
Teacher Strategies Reported by Students

	1st Grade	5th Grade	8th Grade
more than two-step system by teacher		3	7
put words on board or list	2	4	5
pronounce them	8	4	
tells us to look them up		1	11
gives a sentence/meaning		7	7

Metacognitive awareness was assessed by asking students how they knew if they had really learned a new word. Not surprisingly, many first graders could not really state a technique to decide if they knew the word. Many first graders interpreted "knowing" a word as being able to say it. Additionally, both 1st and 5th graders relied heavily on external authority in the form of teacher response or tests to tell them if they knew it. This contrasted sharply with most 8th graders who relied on their ability to use and understand others using the word. (Figure 3)

Figure 3
How Students Know if They Have Learned a Word

	1st Grade	5th Grade	8th Grade
teacher or test tells me	5	9	4
understand it when used in book or orally	1	4	9
I just remember it	3	3	3
I can use it orally or in a sentence		5	6

When students were given an unfamiliar word and were asked what they wanted the examiner to do to help them learn it, prompts were given until the student asked no more questions about the word. Figure 4 reveals the patterns of student responses, with first graders relying primarily on pronunciation and 8th graders searching consistently for meaning. As can be seen from the tabulated responses, the quantity of questions increased over grade levels also. (Figure 4)

Figure 4
Question Students Ask to Lean a New Word

	1st Grade	5th Grade	8th Grade
say it	13	10	9
spell it	3		
use in sentence		3	7
give definition	4	15	17

The differences which emerge across grade levels echo both instruction and the reality of the reading demands placed on students at different grade levels. First graders could rarely articulate a strategy that they would use to learn vocabulary words, and when they had an opportunity to learn new words, they overwhelmingly asked only how to pronounce the word and not what the word meant. Generally, of course, it would be sufficient for first graders to learn the pronunciation of the word because most "new" words they learn are already part of their oral vocabulary. Fifth grade students began to articulate more elaborate strategies for learning words, and they displayed more interest in learning the meaning of the word than the first graders. Although their initial questions upon being asked how they would learn a new word still centered around pronunciation, most eventually asked for a definition of the word. In fact, it is perhaps surprising that even a handful of fifth graders were satisfied that they "knew" the word with only the pronunciation. In contrast, all eighth graders asked to know the meaning of the word during the learning task. However, when asked to articulate their strategies for learning vocabulary, not all of them had a system.

Differences in metacognitive awareness also surfaced at successive grade levels. When students were asked how they knew if they really knew a word, virtually all first graders and most of the fifth graders relied on external validation. That is, the teacher, parent, or test was the way students validated their knowledge. By the time students were in eighth grade their validation system rested with usage. Students knew words when they could use them in speaking or when they understood them as others used them in speaking and writing.

When students reflected on the hardest and easiest parts of learning new vocabulary, no trends emerged. What this may mean for teachers is that using multiple strategies is necessary in order to meet the variety of skill strengths and needs of each student. It may also argue for allowing students to study vocabulary in ways most compatible with their learning styles and preferences.

Sometimes what students don't mention is as interesting as they do mention. Not one student mentioned content reading as a source of new vocabulary words. Even eighth graders automatically seemed to assume that vocabulary is something which is taught in language arts class. Perhaps this reflects reality. If so, we need to make a concerted effort to work with content area teachers to acquaint them with newer research and techniques for vocabulary instruction.

Do these trends continue into the senior high school years? We don't know the answer to this question yet, though it is clearly an avenue which begs to be explored. Another avenue for exploration rests with classroom teachers. At each grade level, strategies that children can articulate and use are strongly reflective of their reports of teacher instruction. Teachers emerge as powerful role models whose instructional strategies provide students with concepts of procedures for learning new words. This modelling should be built upon. Perhaps teachers need to begin to articulate more clearly to students the essentials of vocabulary learning. Perhaps, too, they need to make more explicit the variety of strategies available to students for learning vocabulary. It has been said that teachers are "mentioners"; we cannot afford to be mentioners in the important realm of vocabulary instruction. We need direct instruction of vocabulary and increased teacher awareness of their role in the process.

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